DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 343 165 CS 213 256

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TITLE Implementation of Integrated Skills Reinforcement Teaching and Learning Strategies in the Social Sciences, Behavioral Sciences and Puerto Rican and Latin-American Studies Courses.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Content Area Reading; *Content Area Writing; Course Descriptions; Higher Education; Learning Strategies; *Nontraditional Students; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS City University of New York NYC Technical Coll; *Integrated Skills Reinforcement; Nonnative Speakers

ABSTRACT

The Integrated Skills Reinforcement (ISR) technique, developed by faculty at La Guardia Community College in New York City, is a student-centered teaching and learning model which can facilitate learning for non-traditional, non-native (frequently underprepared) students. It aims to develop and integrate students' basic skills into course content, while introducing the specific subject matter of the course. During the fall 1989 semester at New York City Technical College, a class in Elements of Sociology implemented ISR strategies. A Learning and Teacher's Guide was developed to facilitate the learning and teaching of sociology and psychology. Students gave oral presentations, engaged in collaborative learning activities, and produced brief writing tasks, ongoing short narratives in a narrative log, and two essays. A Student's Learning Guide illustrated the strategies for using sociological and psychological terms and developing college level vocabulary. An ongoing anecdotal log documented students' reactions, while a clinical journal kept by the teacher recorded classroom activities and observations. Students found the learning guide and the ISR strategies helpful, and made the most significant improvements in vocabulary development and confidence in speaking. The ISR model lends itself to all content areas because of its structure, organization, and flexibility. (Fifteen references are attached.) (SR)

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Implementation of Integrated Skills Reinforcement Teaching and Learning Strategies in the the Social Sciences, Behavioral Sciences and Puerto Rican and Latin-American Studies Courses

John D. Vazquez, Ed.D.

Introduction

The older, part-time, commuter-type students reflect the non-traditional students who disportionately represent the underprepared student population in higher education (Boyer, 1987). To their ranks are added the newcomers, the non-Anglo-Saxon students, a student population that needs to learn to live and work in a different, rapidly changing milieu.

The shift from the "elitist" model through "mass education" and on to "universal access" has created a different setting in higher education today and suggests continuous change as we approach the 21st century (Trow, 1973). Through universal access we have opened the doors of higher education to all groups and classes of people. The current immigration patterns are reflected in colleges and universities throughout America. The shift in student population is noted in Bonner's (1986) article

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which states that in 1940, 60 percent of college students were male and 97 percent were white. Today some colleges have student populations that are more than 85 percent nonwhite and above 49 percent female, such as New York City Technical College, and other branches of the City University.

In 1950 colleges and universities throughout the United States had approximately 100,000 Blacks enrolled. The minority college student population has gradually but slowly increased since the 1954 Brown decision and the activities of the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s (Astin, 1983). Today, there are about 12.5 million college students in the United States of which 1,101,499 are Afro-Americans (about 9 percent), 519,250 are Hispanics (about 2.5 percent), 351,001 are Asians (about 2 percent), and 87,700 are Native-Americans (less than 1 percent). A group that constitutes a diversified minority student population that is seeking a "quality" education.

To insure a "quality" education for all colleges and university students many educators are seeking new ways of teaching and studying learning styles in the classroom. There are many innovative learning and teaching techniques being applied in the classrooms of American Colleges & Universities today. Among

those innovative approaches are the strategies in the Integrated Skills Reinforcement (ISR) model. Strategies that are student centered and faculty sensitive. Approaches that serve a changing student population.

Integrated Skills Reinforcement (ISR)

The Integrated Skills Reinforcement (ISR) technique is a model that provides faculty with strategies that assist student learning in content areas. A student-centered model that encourages greater interaction between student and faculty and the creation of synergy in the classroom. The student is much more involved in her/his learning activities.

The ISR model was developed by a group of committed faculty at La Guardia Community College in New York City. It was the result of the students who successfully completed remedial courses in reading, writing, and mathematics but had a tendency to weaken in these areas as they proceeded to regular college courses. The poor basic skills subjected them to neglect and/or relegation by content area instructors. They were seldom invited to participate in classroom activities, like group discussions, or chalkboard computational exercises. Instructors did not see

their role as remedial teachers and were primarily concerned with content and subject mastery. There was no time for teaching students to read a sociological treatise or a psychological abstract.

The ISR model involves two phases: a program of basic skills and the integration of the skills into the course content. The ISR strategies aims to develop the basic communication skills while introducing specific subject matter, e.g. sociological and psychological theories and concepts.

The teaching and learning strategies are initiated with a series of assessments of students facility with reading, writing, oral and listening skills. Reading can be assessed with the application of a Cloze test developed from the required textbook. The initial writing assignment is a 6-sentence brief writing task that identifies the student's reason for being enrolled in the course. All students are required to orally introduce themselves the second class meeting. Listening skills are assessed by the assignment of a narrative log which is to note the interpretation of the class discussion and their analysis of the class process. The narrative log assigned is an ongoing assessment process that demonstrates the students level of listening and reading skills.

The narrative log must include both the classroom process and highlights from the reading assignment that parallels the concept or theory to be discussed. To reinforce reading and writing for the content area the student is given a focus question, ongoing questions, and a summary question for all topics introduced in class or assigned in the course outline. Oral presentation assignments are discussed among small groups in class before the oral presentation is made before the class. The strategies noted help the instructor to develop a structured, but flexible learning and teaching guide for a content area course, e.g. sociology and psychology.

The ISR model was selected because of its positive evaluations from participants, its student centeredness, and evaluators of institutions of Higher Education within and outside of CUNY.

The Learning and Teacher's Guide that was developed is designed to facilitate the learning and teaching of sociology and psychology. The Guide directs and facilitates the understanding of sociological and psychological concepts by the extensive, detailed assignments of selected readings, writings, and oral presentations which are accompanied by ongoing questions, and a summary question for each of the theories and concepts

introduced. The writing assignments indicate reading comprehension level and demonstrate application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation skills. The student is required to produce brief writing tasks, ongoing short narratives, and an essay on social class classification and in psychology an essay on personality development or the social life of an infant. The Student's Learning Guide illustrates the strategies that help the student use sociological and psychological terms and develop college level vocabulary.

Considering the non-native limited English speaking and English as a Second Language student population, writing and speaking skills are stressed in my classes. The assessment of essay writings is a joint effort between an instructor from the English department and the course instructor. However, the ongoing narrative writing and brief writing tasks are assessed solely by the instructor. The ongoing narrative log is submitted for each scheduled class by the student. The log is in response to focus and ongoing questions on the topic or concept presented during the class session. In addition the student is expected to include the highlights from the related assigned readings. The log is a form of ongoing feedback that assists the instructor in noting the students' listening skills, reading comprehension as

well as the instructor's clarity in the presentation of subject matter.

During the 1989 Fall semester at New York City Technical College in a class of Elements of Sociology the implementation of ISR strategies documented in an ongoing anecdotal log the students' reactions to the instructor's application of a students learning guide in Elements of Sociology. The reactions to the materials as presented noted that they related more to the subject matter as compared to some of their other courses, e.g. health education. The clinical journal kept by me recorded classroom activities and the observations made during lectures, class discussions, exercises, and noted the highlights of each class session. The narrative made note of reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities during the 1½ hour class sessions. In addition particular note was taken of writing and speaking assignments.

The "Elements of Sociology" course introduced the student to a new spoken and written language. In this course the student was exposed to a behavioral and social scientific language that enabled them to relatively understand their role in society and their development as a person. While in this learning process

the student was expected to enhance their writing skills. To note improvement the written skills were assessed for: (1) completion and correct response to the written assignment; i.e. specific information requested, (2) use of behavioral and social science language; e.g. social science language; e.g. social structure, culture, (3) number of mechanical errors, such as grammar, spelling, syntax, (4) clarity and conciseness; e.g. clear, direct statements, (5) coherency and sequence; e.g. logical order, (6) active rather than passive writing, (7) content; e.g. anecdotes or examples and must be supported by facts and appropriate college level vocabulary.

Assessment Process

The assessment of the writing process was two-fold: (a) holistic scoring from an English and/or an English As A Second Language instructor (it should be noted that at least 85% of the students enrolled in Elements of Sociology are non-traditional English As A Second Language students) and (b) instructor evaluation.

The assessment process took place during the 11th week of the semester. Moreover, the process was initiated during the end of the second week. Each student received an article and was asked

to read, interpret, and in no more than 12 or 15 sentences draw conclusions and/or make inferences on the assigned reading.

The class received two articles. Half of the students were assigned article A: "The Neo-Rican: Unwelcomed in Two Worlds." The other half of the class was assigned article B, "South Africa, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Home: Understanding the Connections." Only the student's social security numbers appeared on each paper. The response to the first brief writing task was put away and not retrieved until the 11th week of the semester.

During the 10th week of the semester the same articles were distributed to the class. This time group A received article B and group B received article A. The second group of writing assignments had no social security numbers and were tagged with a green star.

During the 11th week of the semester the papers were mixed and all of them given to an English As A Second Language instructor. Each instructor as well as an English Department instructor. Each instructor did a holistic scoring. Each brief writing task was graded for grammar, syntax, and overall articulation. The

instructors noted if the level of writing was college level.

Instructor Evaluation

The Sociology instructor looked for documentation and appropriate use of behavioral and social scientific language.

The first writing task was compared to the second brief writing task in order to note betterment or status quo in content and form. In sociology both the content and form can be influenced by an active writer. As noted by Becker in Writing for Social Scientists (1986), "the way people write grows out of the social situations they write in." In Sociology classes and in Psychology classes at New York City Tech the student seldom is distant from his writing.

The writing assignments were evaluated with the use of a checklist which included the written skills noted earlier.

The scores from the holistic scoring and the grades on the first brief writing tasks were compared to the grades on the second writing assignment. The comparisons determined if any improvement had occurred during the course of the semester.

It was assumed that appropriate use of behavioral and social scientific language along with a college level general vocabulary was key in assessing a student's written language skills in a discipline.

The assessment of speaking or oral presentations was based on five components:

a. A clear presentation (volume and diction)
b. Demonstration of a good understanding (theme or focus of topic)
c. Responses to questions (focused)
d. Good examples and/or relevant anecdotes
e. Poise and mannerisms (delivery). It is important to use words correctly and express ideas concisely.

While communication skills were emphasized, verbal abilities or oral competencies were noted less than the other basic skills. Roueche (1984) stated that "verbal requirements in courses ... are among the most demanding and difficult of any curriculum. Yet, faculty teaching introductory courses know little about this." We must be sensitive to the fact that non-traditional, non-native students have language patterns and deficiencies which present a serious handicap when communicating with diverse groups

of people, and can hinder employability and acceptance of competency by colleagues (Smith and Bass, 1984); a performance that is damaging to the image and credibility of the professional.

Limitations of the Sample

The sample offered is to demonstrate how the ISR strategies are effective and are a way of facilitating learning for non-traditional, non-native frequently underprepared students. But all underprepared as well as prepared students can benefit from the ISR strategies and have at other institutions of higher education.

While the application is limited to one content area course with a group of 35 students it showed that both student and teacher can add to their skills. The goal is to identify and develop new teaching and learning strategies so that the student and the professoriate can best meet the learning and teaching challenges in the 21st century.

Final Observations and Conclusions

Throughout the semester several students complained that there was too much writing, but they all commented at one point or another that the learning guide was very helpful in understanding the textbook and the sociological theories and concepts. Both in their ongoing writings (logs) and in the final evaluation narratives they stated that the Learning Guide questions, the focus, ongoing, and summary questions from the instructor's guide placed on the chalkboard were very helpful. All the students commented that the vocabulary items in the Learning Guide and the previewing of the textbook were very important and helpful. Some students noted that the examples of prewritings and rough drafts that accompanied the brief writing task should accompany other writing assignments, such as the three-page essay assigned. The two students indicated that the Cloze test was a waste of time. The consensus of the 35 students who completed the class of Elements of Sociology was that other classes should implement the Learning Guide and the ISR teaching and learning strategies. The results indicated that the Learning Guide was most helpful to the underprepared and those with limited English speaking writing skills.

The most significant improvements for this Elements of Sociology class was vocabulary development and confidence in speaking. The underprepared students who are not too familiar with textbooks need constant reinforcement within a meaningful, identifiable context if they are going to enrich and expand their word power. This was brought forth by the use of the ongoing writings and brief writing task, and the collaborative learning activities. Anderson and Weiner have stated in the ISR text, "to gain access to the disciplines, we must master the vocabulary of those disciplines (Anderson, et al., 1983).

The collaborative learning activities along with the second oral presentation on their self-image and "what do you want to be when you grow up" (ideal self) appeared to induce a more relaxed situation. The activity created a self-confidence that assisted many students who were resistant to speaking because of a foreign accent. This activity was initiated with some comments by the instructor that most of use had some type of accent but that it did not deter the capacity to speak intelligently. The first brief oral introduction, the second oral presentation, and the collaborative learning activities created a sense of community among the speakers. The process of dialoguing contributed to their vocabulary development and confidence in speaking before a

group of colleagues. The collaborative learning activities as a teaching and learning strategy helped socialize and orient the students and most important helped them to understand their role in the sociological perspective. The technique enhanced their affective skills as well ad their cognitive skills. The interaction moved them from a provincial experience to a more inclusive, cosmopolitan experience, this was especially true of the older limited English speaking foreign-born students from rural backgrounds. Developmental psychologists and writing research such as David Bartholomae support the collaborative learning activity because of its enhancement of the affective skills (Bartholomae, 1986). All the learning and teaching strategies used enhanced the students' vocabulary development in the social sciences because it was student-centered and they were active rather than passive writers in sociology (Becker, 1986).

Implications for Future Development

The Integrated Skills Reinforcement (ISR) methodologies provide sufficient flexibility to be expanded and implemented in all content areas. It is a model that is student-centered and a productive, operational vehicle for the instructor. Stanford Ericksen (1984), McKeachie (1986), and Katz (1985) stipulate that

student-centered discussion groups are an effective teaching-learning strategy. There can be some difficulties in this approach but the use of the ISR model facilitates and makes the technique successful. The learning and teaching strategies provided sufficient latitude so that the instructor could tailor the ISR curriculum to meet the objectives of the particular discipline. The strategies used in this project and the results substantiated the works of Boyer (1987), McKeachie (1986), Ericksen (1986), Katz (1985), and Bruffee (1986).

The findings of this study suggest that integrated attention be given to writing throughout the curriculum. Writing skills do not improve with a few courses, either in development or life-long learning. Ericksen indicates that writing is about the variety of things students learn in their courses. Therefore teachers across the curriculum should include writing assignments that will improve the quality or written discourse (Ericksen, 1984). Writing must be reinforced across the curriculum. Writing and speaking promote interaction with peers and leads to a sense of community (Anderson, et al., 1983). The ISR strategies provide a base and frame of reference from which a teacher can attain and maintain a good, ongoing relationship with the students. The findings in this project coincide with Boyer's

comments that the primary function of higher education is to guide and assist the student in becoming proficient in writing and speaking. Through the development of their language skills the students improved the thinking processes and become empowered intellectually and socially (Boyer, 1987).

The ISR model implemented in this projected indicated that the student must be involved at all stages and levels of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The student is at the center of his learning activities. The essence of the professorial role and the emergence of the academic ethics as noted by Edward Shils lies in a student-centered, teacher sensitive, flexible, integrated skills curriculum, and institution support.

The ISR teaching and learning strategies used in this study substantiated the validity of the primary conditions for excellence stipulated by the NIE Study Group on Conditions of Excellence in Higher Education (NIE, 1985). According to the authors, the institution and its faculty must use existing knowledge about student involvement, have high expectations, and have an assessment and feedback process. The recommendations of the National Institute of Education Study Group parallel the ISR learning and teaching strategies administered in this project.

The Student Learning Guide and the Instructor's Guide Manual illustrate high expectations, an emphasis on communication skills, and an ongoing assessment process.

The assessment activity brought about the opportunity for interdisciplinary cooperation such as the holistic scoring done by a writing and speech instructor. The two videotapings on the class process were reviewed by a colleague from another content area and members of the media center at New York City Technical College.

The NIE report indicates that quality teaching involves risk-taking and meeting the challenges that emerge from student activities while in the learning process. The application of the ISR learning and teaching strategies in Elements of Sociology were a risk and challenge that yielded positive results. The ISR model curriculum should be implemented in other content areas such as psychology and Puerto Rican and Latin American classes. The author of this study will include several of the learning and teaching strategies assessed in the coming semesters at New York City Technical College and implement the ISR model curriculum in the areas indicated above, e.g. Developmental Psychology, History of Puerto Rico, and Puerto Ricans in New York City and Urban

America. Such efforts are encouraged by Alexander Astin's work, Achieving Academic Excellence, where he emphasized that successful pedagogical approaches must be maintained to meet the immediate challenges of educating the underprepared students. The ISR model curriculum lends itself to application in all general education content areas because of its structure, organization, and flexibility.

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